

Movie Makers

January-February, 2002

Volume 12 No. 1

The American Motion Picture Society

Sponsors of the oldest continuing Film/video Festival in the world.

Public Access and Your Production

Matt Jenkins

Festivaling is a frustrating and un-rewarding effort, unless you win. And yet there are few other places to show our productions. Fortunately there is the convention. But I am interested in having my work seen by even larger audiences. What else is there?

With one documentary I produced, I obtained a list of all the PBS television stations in the country and the name of the program manager at each station. Since there were quite a few, I couldn't realistically send them all preview copies. So I produced a nice brochure and sent a letter with it indicating they could have a preview copy if they contacted me. This resulted in one station airing the docu-

mentary.

There is also public access. What is public access? Each community or city negotiates with a cable company to offer cable service. In this agreement, the cable operator usually agrees to offer a cable channel that will air programming produced by the people who live in that area. A great



idea. However, public access is often considered to not be real TV. I think we can change that.

If you are fortunate enough to

live in a community that has public access, simply go and find out what it takes to get your work aired. It could be as easy as signing a paper saying you produced the work and handing them a tape.

What if you want your work to air in a community in which you do not live? Then you must find someone who resides in that community to sponsor your program. This person will essentially sign the paper indicating that he or she is sponsoring the program and then he or she will hand the cable channel operator the tape.

By doing this, I have had my work shown on Cape Cod, East Hartford, Connecticut, and in Greenwich, Connecticut. And soon I hope to have my work air in New York City.

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Movie Makers

Dedicated to the interests of the Serious Motion Picture Maker.

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George W. Cushman
Founder,
1909-1996

Matt Jenkins, Editor

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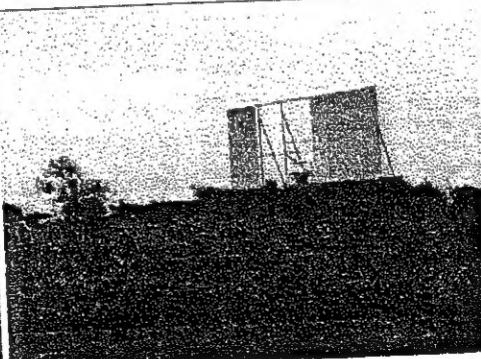
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From the Editor

Happy New Year! It's time for new beginnings and to finish uncompleted projects. I am reinvigorated and ready to work.

For me, in the beginning, the task of production is overwhelming. I must remember that I narrow the topic down as I conduct research and I will break the production process up into manageable steps.

I am considering a couple of different ideas for my next documentary. So it depends on the research available, money I need, and how much available production time I have which idea I choose.



Also, I am going to remake a campy sci-fi movie I produced five years ago. I've increased the number of characters and increased the number of locations. Maybe that isn't such a good idea. However, it is something that I have wanted to do for a while now. I will

keep AMPS readers updated on this production's progress.

My last documentary covers true and independent movie producers. What I mean by "true and independent" is, these people produce entertainment separate from the Hollywood machine. So far this documentary has been entered into eight festivals. It has been rejected from two. One of the festivals, which will remain nameless until I read the judge's comments, rejected the production prior to the festivals' cut off date. I am concerned about this. How can my production be judged compared to others when it was rejected before other productions were sent in? So I will hold my thoughts until I read those comments.

On a sadder note, my mother-in-law is suffering from cancer. I'm not sure if the treatment is helping or hurting her. However, it really provides me with my own sense of mortality. I remember my grandfather's last concern before he passed. He worried that he would be forgotten. While I believe that we live on through our children, my hope is I will leave a small mark on this world through my productions. Maybe this idea, in part, drives my passion for production.

No I don't expect to be a fa-

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Avoiding Audio Problems

By Matt Jenkins

Audio is an essential but often neglected component of video production. We are all guilty of allowing poor audio to slip by us in editing and allowing it on to the final production.

By following some simple suggestions, many audio problems can be avoided.

Using a microphone that is separate from the camera. Virtually all camcorders now have external mic input jacks. Spend the money and purchase a high quality microphone and appropriate cable to plug into the camera.

Separating the mic from the camera will allow for better mic placement in relation to subject and will avoid capturing the noises inherent with the camera motor.

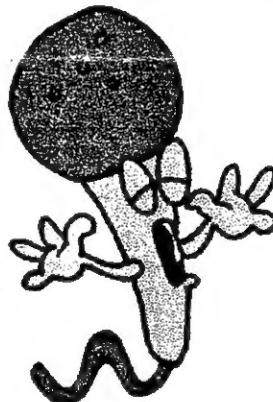
I use a SONY ECM lapel mic. I am able to quickly clip the mic to the interviewee. Now the mic is visible in the shot and other producers criticize me for having the mic in the shot. However, the quality of audio is excellent so it is a trade off since I usually shoot alone and do not have the luxury of an audio operator

who can place a shot gun mic with a fish pole.

I will ask the interviewee to hide the mic cable under the shirt or blouse or I will try to get a close up that doesn't show the mic.

You will find that you will most likely choose between two mic patterns, an omnidirectional and a unidirectional. An omni-directional will capture sound from all directions equally well. A unidirectional mic will pick up audio from one direction only. Both have advantages and disadvantages.

Production textbook writers



claim that using an omnidirectional pattern, will increase the likelihood of picking up extraneous noise. While I agree with this, I will usually scout my location and try to eliminate unwanted noise or avoid shooting in areas that have audio interferences. Examples of interference include crickets, overhead power lines, and busy streets with lots of traffic. So I feel confident when using an omni-directional pattern.

Many production books also recommend purchasing a camera with a manual volume control. By all means do this if you can afford to purchase such a camera. Otherwise you will have to learn the limits of the automatic gain (audio) control on your camera. Usually going out and practice shooting will help you to learn the capabilities and limits.

Purchase a full muff set of headphones. I once shot an interview outside on what I thought was a windless day so I didn't use headphones. When I played back the tape, half of the responses were clouded by wind. Whenever this documentary is played, the most common response I receive is, "Boy what a windy day!"

Tape the interview, ask the interviewee to wait a moment, and play back the interview using the headphones. You will catch a lot of problems that are easily fixed in the field but impossible to repair in the edit stage.

In editing, whether you edit tape-to-tape, or with a non-linear editor, check your audio levels before editing each shot. The voice should register between 0 and -5 db on a VU meter and music or natural sound should register no higher than -20db.

Judging World-Wide

No. 19 – July 1994

George Cushman

We recently asked festival judges around the world what they look for in films. We heard from three. Here they are:

CANADA

Judges are influenced by the criteria of motion picture production including focus, exposure, camera handling, music selection, sound recording and of course story.

I deduct points if I see a hand held camera when the use of a tripod is indicated. It's a common fault, usually just laziness. Hand held cameras are O.K. for moving subjects, a sports event or a fast moving nature subject. In the final result it isn't the camera that moves.

Choice of subject shouldn't influence judges, but it does. I recently judged a competition in which all producers were young students. Over 90% of the entries were gloomy, sordid, violent, sexy, down-beat productions. A couple that were light and humorous got higher marks.

The rapid advances in video technology have made possible some remarkable effects. These are not all good. Videographers would do well to remember that the best transition is a simple cut. The fact that we

associate one image with the proceeding one is what makes motion pictures possible.

*John Carey, FRPS
Canadian Film Festival*

MALTA

Non-commercial films usually come in two categories: those presented by film school students where the finish and also the polish are very refined, and those made by single individuals with the help. Maybe of family and friends which often betray their origin. The irony is that while film school students stick to an original idea which is developed, narrative-wise in fiction films and linear-wise in documentaries, abstract and animated films, strictly according to theme with hardly any intrusions in subplots or other marginal paraphernalia aimed to give "significance," many other non-commercial films are pretentious and try to imitate commercial films with hardly any means at all.

What a judge looks forward to is a single idea, developed at script stage in the most economical way. Bearing in mind that availability or creation of sets or set pieces, sparsely shot according to the spirit of the film without any decorative frills, again economically edited, leaving in what is absolutely essential and letting the audience figure out the rest, and imaginatively directed in the sense that if one has photogenic actors who,

however, cannot act, it is better to stay on close-ups, and if one has "big" special effects which one cannot afford, it is better to stay on a montage style. All in all, modesty is recommended.

*Anthony Muscat
Golden Knight Film Festival*

SWEDEN

The films in our festival are judged by professionals.

Usually five judges see the films together. After each film they jot down their impressions of the film under the following guidelines:

Common viewpoints: (content, dramaturgy, editing, etc.)

What is seen: (actors, requisites, milieus, etc.)

How it is seen: (composition of the pictures, camera work, lighting, etc.)

What is heard: (dialogue, sound effects, music, etc.)

Then the five judges discuss the films, and decide on their choices.

Most important is a film that is interesting to watch, that the story is well visualized. If it is too long it can be boring. If it is hard to understand the interest will fall.

The judges' comment sheets are given to the producer.

*Bjorn Andreasson
SFV-festivalen*

Why Not Shoot a Movie?

Matt Jenkins

I can't remember the person I had the conversation with perhaps it was Roger Garretson. He remarked that our International friends wanted to know why American entries into their festivals usually consisted of travelogues and not fictional stories or "scenarios."

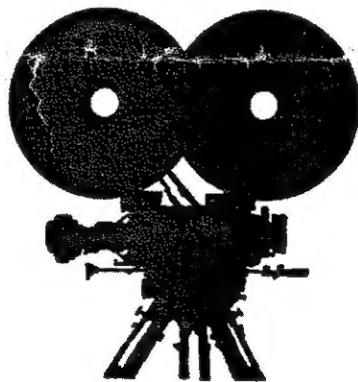
Why don't we produce more scenarios? I look over my own body of work. The last fictional movie I produced was in 1997. Now I will admit, I tend to crank out the documentaries because I love history and I believe that the administration at my University looks more favorably upon documentary production. However, I've never had a big festival win with a fictional piece or asked the administration what they preferred. What if I had a big festival win with a movie?

While producing documentaries I have been, for the most part, writing movie scripts. But I haven't moved toward shooting any of them. At the last convention, I did meet some people who were producing short movies and I applaud their efforts and encourage them to continue. In fact

I plan to show some of their work to my independent production class.

Yes, some of the winners from last year's AMPS festival were fictional works but I dare say less than a third were.

I suppose its easy to grab the camcorder, go on vacation, shoot a lot of countryside and create a narration to go along with it. Shooting a fictional movie does take more time and effort. But it isn't difficult when the production process is broken down into manageable steps and it can actually be quite rewarding.



You must have an idea before you can shoot. You don't have to shoot the two hour epic. Moviemaker Joyce Axelrod's productions are 2 to 6 minutes in length and are quite entertaining.

Don't have any ideas? Talk to your friends, neighbors, read the newspaper! Ideas are all around us. Do a little brainstorming to come up with a

doable idea. Low budget producer Pat Bishow of Amusement Films, (*El Frenetico* and *Go-Girl* and *The Girls From Harm*) says to look around you and write scenes over the stuff around you. He writes scenes based on his friend's antique car and Vespa Scooter.

Once you have the idea, it is important to write a script. Generally, first, there will be a prose statement of the idea called a treatment. Next comes the dialogue script. This script fleshes out the characters and storyline. Then the director will create a shooting script from the dialogue script. The shooting script indicates the shots for each scene. Do you have to go through all these steps? No! If you are shooting a short scenario, you can jump right to the shooting script. Plan out everything your characters will say and visualize the shots. My new mantra this year is: "Just because it is low-budget doesn't mean it has to look low-budget." As low-budget, no-budget or amateur producers, the one thing we plenty of is time to plan out our production.

Arrange your shooting schedule by location. If the character appears in the same location in the first scene and the last scene of the movie, shoot both scenes at the same time. This will cut down on moving your equipment and the number of times your actors have

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to show up.

Keep the number of characters and locations small. There's nothing worse than having a large cast and half of them quit mid-way through shooting. Concerning actors, Pat Bishow likes to work with people he knows well and only bring in one or two new people. He says that everyone wants to be in the movies until they find out how much work it is for little or no pay and then they start dropping like flies.

Shoot in daytime. Shooting at night causes incredible lighting problems, especially when the director is trying to light large areas and still wants the scene to look like its naturally night.

Or, shoot indoors. Acquiring a quality light kit can greatly aid your images. I purchased a set of 3 mini-fresnels at a yard sale for \$10.00. I had to replace the bulbs and had to re-wire the sockets but I use the lights every time I shoot. Also, watch out for contrast. Contrast is the difference between the lightest and darkest parts of the screen. Our televisions do not like a lot of contrast. So evenly light everything!

Are you excited? Ready to go and shoot that movie? In shooting your epic,

first get an idea,

script it out,

keep the number of characters and locations small,

work with people you know well and trust,

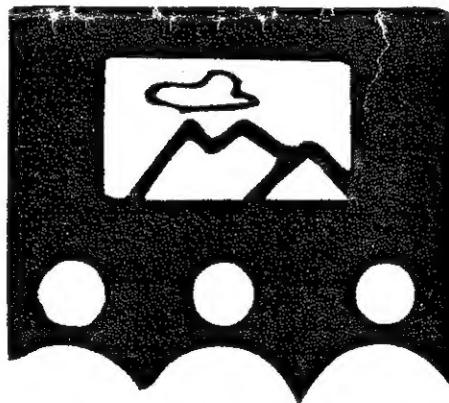
shoot by location,

shoot in daytime or indoors using lights,

pay attention to contrast

pay attention to audio,
and of course take your time
in editing.

Voila! You may just have cooked up the next award-winning movie!



Visit the website at:

**www.angelfire.
com/movies/
amps**

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The people I ask to sponsor my work are usually relatives or close friends of the family. My work is family oriented, does not endorse any lotteries or contain pornography.

What good is it to have your work air and no one knows about it. It doesn't do much good. I've tried purchasing ads in newspapers. It's expensive and ad placement is always lousy. I've tried getting columnists for area newspapers interested in what I was showing and to write about it. Usually they don't write about it. And in one case, the writer used the information I provided to write a story regarding another event and did not even mention my documentary airing!

One method that I heard independent moviemakers use, is e-mailing people you know who live in those areas and asking them to e-mail people they know and for those people to e-mail people they know. This can work well.

The nice thing about most public access channels is that your production will air more than once. So those who miss the first broadcast will have a chance to see it again.

Unfortunately you cannot choose what airs before and

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mous director and perhaps it is a bit vain of me to think I am worthy of leaving a "mark" on this world. I picture what I produce as a kind of personal story telling. I don't expect to make any money at it but I want more people to have the opportunity to watch my work.

These words, by Michael Rabiger in his book "Directing the Documentary, 3rd Edition," provide great inspiration for me:

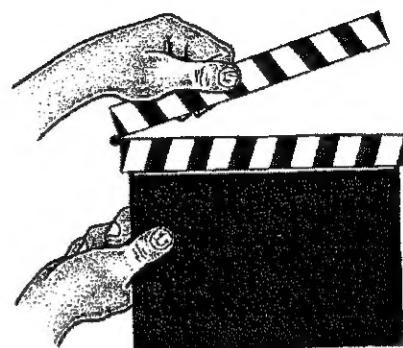
"You and I need not pass so silently from life. Future historians will have as their resource, documentaries that are grassroots visions, not just what was preserved by

an elite and its servants. You and I can use cinematic language – the 20th century's great contribution to universal understanding- to create a record of family, friends and surroundings; to pose ideas and questions; and to convey what we see and feel. We can propose the causes, effects, and meanings of the life we are leading. We can bear witness to these times, reinterpret history and prophesy the future. The consequences for democracy, and for a richer and more humorous tapestry of cultures are incalculable. This is the art and purview of the documentary film." (p 12.)

So don't be surprised if there are articles regarding distribu-

tion of your productions and more about producing quality low-budget or amateur productions in this and future newsletters.

As always, you may e-mail me at mattj@cameron.edu.



Upcoming Festivals

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after your production. Hope that it is the community billboard because my work has followed some pretty bad programs. But that's life in public access!

Maybe we AMPS members should band together and those of us who have public access could sponsor other members' productions for airing purposes. Is there anyone willing to help out with this?

Public access can be a viable outlet for your work. I am still searching for other ways to have my work seen. Any suggestions? Please e-mail me at mattj@cameron.edu.

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I Would like to Join the Society:

Dues USA: (includes - Movie Maker) \$ 10.00

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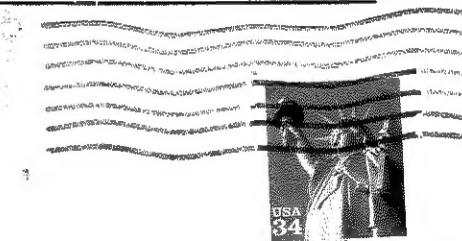
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